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NOTES ON SOME WHISTLER ETCHINGS

THE mere facts of the technique of etching can be acquired in one lesson," writes Joseph Pennell, himself a distinguished etcher. "But," he adds, "the making of an etching requires the knowledge of a lifetime."

With biting sarcasm he then declares that etching is not really a method for displaying sincere stupidity on as large a copper plate as possible; a grinding, dragging, slaving, and turning out laboriously, prints which possess no merit whatever; a fashion of making plates equaled in bigness only by their badness; a depending on some one else to print proofs, or a juggling with printers' ink one's self. They are not squashed or printed oil paintings, or copies of pencil sketches; nor, finally, are etchings copies of some other etcher's work. Such methods have been and may even now be considered within the province of the etcher, but they do not constitute the art as the great etchers understood it—and Mr. Pennell calls attention to the fact that in the art history of the world, there have been, of great etchers, less than a dozen. Etching, as they practised it, is a means of expressing on a plate, "the most delicate, the most subtle, the most refined, the most personal sensations which come to an artist, provided always he can perceive them and has the ability to record them. No one but an artist can do this, and how many artists are there in the world? Etching is sketching

on a plate, and how many modern plates prove the artist can sketch? Etching is putting down a subject in the fewest and the most vital lines; how many artists think of line at all? Etching means giving the character of a place or a person, and how many artists have even any character of their own? Etching means doing all these things and others like them superlatively well with the most obedient tools on the most responsive surfaces of metal, provided the artist has the skill to dominate his subject and use his tools."

But if one wishes to know what etching is, Mr. Pennell asserts that to examine the etchings of Whistler is to study from a master, much of whose work has never been approached by any other artist at any time. "To know this is to know etching—to know the perfect flower of the art—the greatest artist of modern times, the greatest etcher of all time—an American—James Abbott McNeill Whistler."

These words were written by Mr. Pennell with reference to an exhibition of about a hundred etchings by Whistler, recently held in the galleries of Frederick Keppel & Co. While the show is over, the portfolios of the firm are open to any one who loves art; for both Mr. Keppel and Mr. Carrington have the temperament which teaches that art is not for the dealer and the possible buyer only, but also for the art lover who may not be able to afford to purchase.

Notes appended by Mr. Pennell to many items of the catalogue of this exhibition make capital reading; and, indeed, the literary quality of the information disseminated by these dealers regarding their exhibitions and stock of prints, has

long been appreciated by the art public. The Whistler notes by Mr. Pennell, gossipy and informing, are a case in point.

For example, the "Little Rag Gatherers" in the French Set. "The most interesting thing about this plate to me is the fact that Whistler thought nothing of the time and trouble involved in changing his plates. Here an entirely new composition was evolved, a whole group of figures added, and there is not the slightest evidence of the great labor in changing it." Or the "Fumette," the crouching figure of a girl of the people, also in the French Set, who was one of the first professional models to sit for Whistler. "She had a terrible temper and one day, in a rage, she tore up—not his prints, as Wedmore says—but a number of drawings."

With reference to "The Kitchen," evidently that of an old French farm house and probably etched when Whistler went to Saverne, in Alsace, to visit a fellow student at Gleyerés, named Dabo (the father of Leon Dabo) Mr. Pennell says that it has passages of luminous shadow which Rembrandt never approached in the "Burgomaster Six," or in any similar subject. Of the "Soupe à Trois Sous"—"Some of Rembrandt's beggars are marvelous. But what of Whistler's tramps, the 'Soupe à Trois Sous,' or the 'Mère Gérard,' or fifty others?" The "Soupe" was done at midnight in a low tavern, which was raided by gendarmes while he was at work. Whistler said he showed them the plate upside down, and as they could make nothing of it, they gave it back to him.

Few who write of Whistler's etchings can avoid comparison with Rembrandt. Thus T. R. Way calls the "Wine

Glass" a marvellous little still life study that may be compared with Rembrandt's "Shell." There are two illuminating notes by Pennell—one regarding the "Greenwich Park," the other on the "Westminster Bridge." The former is one of the very few landscapes Whistler either etched or painted. "Landscape did not appeal to him. Had it, however, his work would have been just as distinguished as his portraits. He always said there was no such thing as a landscape or a portrait painter. A man can paint anything if he can paint at all." "Westminster Bridge" is spoken of by Mr. Pennell as one of the few Whistler plates in which the monumental architecture of London appears—the Houses of Parliament. That he could draw architecture is completely proved by the Belgian Series alone, but he did not care for it usually. "And why repeat a masterpiece?" he always said. This is one of the Thames Set. To the same set belongs "The Forge" which, however, as Mr. Pennell points out was made in Brittany, at Perros Guirec. He adds that, as in almost all sets, Whistler included in this one, plates that bear no relation to the title.

Mr. Pennell's personal knowledge of such matters adds infinitely to the interest of these notes. Take for example, this bit of information about the "Rotherhithe" in the Thames Set. Whistler told Pennell that a scratch across the sky that appears in some prints was caused by a brick from a chimney being repaired falling behind him and making him jump so that he scratched the plate with his needle from top to bottom. How disillusioning to some collectors who may have

looked upon that accidental scratch as a stroke of genius! The annotator adds that the "Rotherhithe" was made on the balcony of the Angel Inn, still standing on the south side of the river, at Cherry Gardens. Rotherhithe is seen in the extreme distance. From this balcony, also, the oils "Wapping" and "The Thames in Ice" were painted by Whistler.

That Mr. Pennell's technical knowledge as an etcher peculiarly qualifies him to comment on etchings, from a technical point of view, goes without saying. It is illustrated by his note on the "Vauxhall Bridge." Wedmore, in his "Whistler's Etchings," says, "The foreground is a spirited confusion of barge, sails, masts and cordage." Pennell makes the following interesting technical observation: "From the work right up to the edges, I believe this is only a piece of the original plate—for example, the rope to the right is quite meaningless, yet it is so positively drawn that it must have led from a mast or yard to some stay which has been cut off." And to conclude with the "Salute: Dawn," from the Venice Set. "Done from his room. He always found his subjects right about him." A characteristic of great artists, who never lament that they were not born in other times and places.